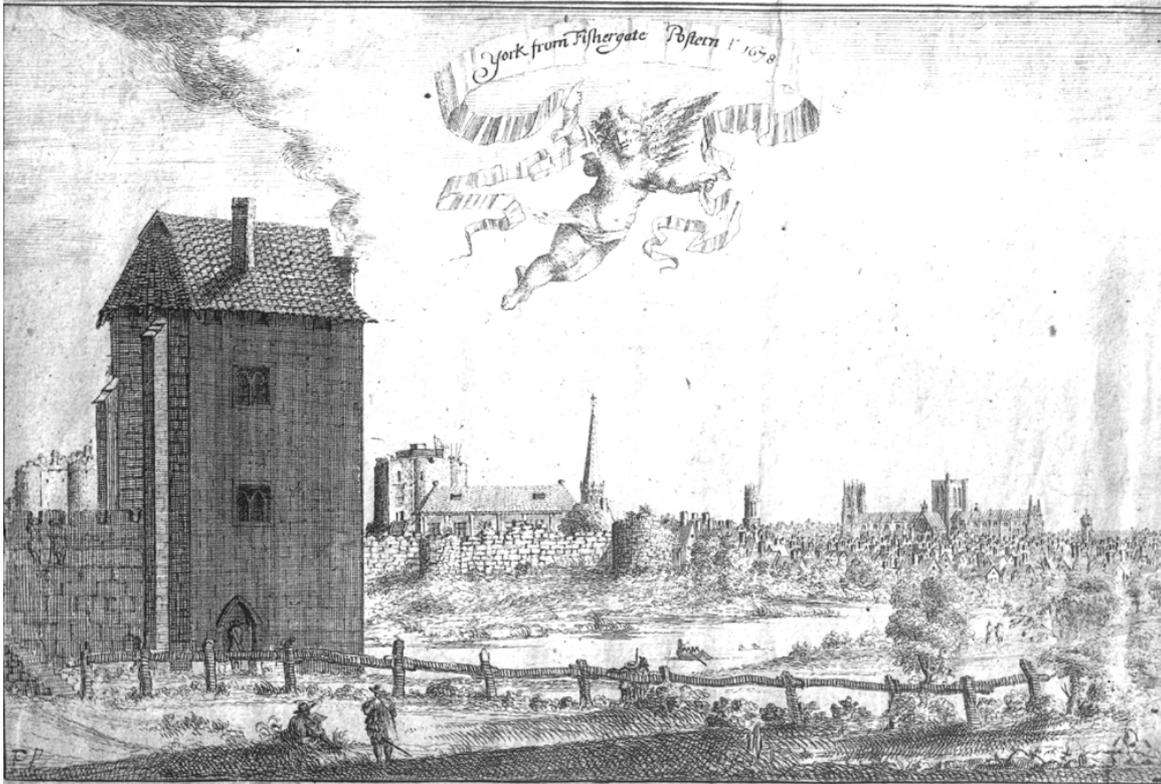




Fishergate Postern Tower



York from Fishergate Postern Ao 1678 – William Lodge. British Museum AN115145001

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Fishergate Postern Tower – An introduction

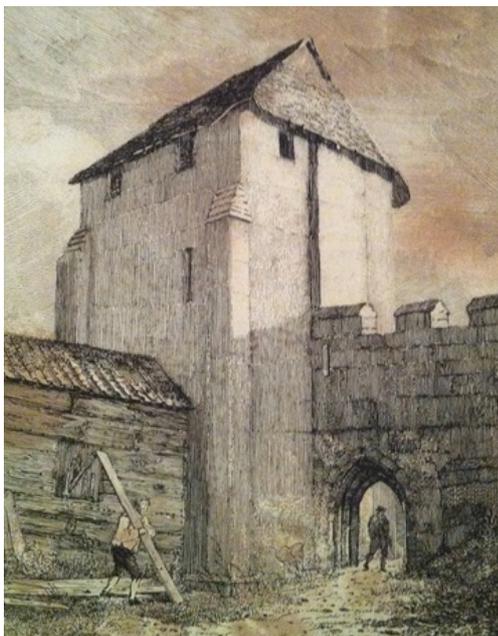
Fishergate Postern Tower is an impressive, Grade I listed, rectangular stone building at the end of a section of York's medieval walls. This section of walls is to the east of the River Foss, the other end of it is at the Red Tower. The Postern Tower is divided from the Castle by the River Foss. The Foss was much broader in earlier days and came up to the foot of the tower.

This is the second Postern Tower on this site. The first was erected some time after 1345 as Angelo Raine, in his book 'Mediaeval York' {1} (1995), states that it is not mentioned in a contract of that date for building this part of the wall. The earliest definite mention of a tower is in a document uncovered by Raine called the 'Custody of the Walls' dated 1406, in which three key-keepers are mentioned for Fishergate postern and the tower.

The first tower is referred to in contemporary sources as the Talken Tower, named after Robert de Talken, a wine merchant, who was York mayor in 1399. This would agree with Raine's first documented reference to Fishergate Postern in 1406 and suggests that the first tower dated from around the turn of the 15th century. Whether this was a stone or wooden tower is not stated. It was probably used as a lookout tower and to keep guard over the postern (small gateway) next to it.



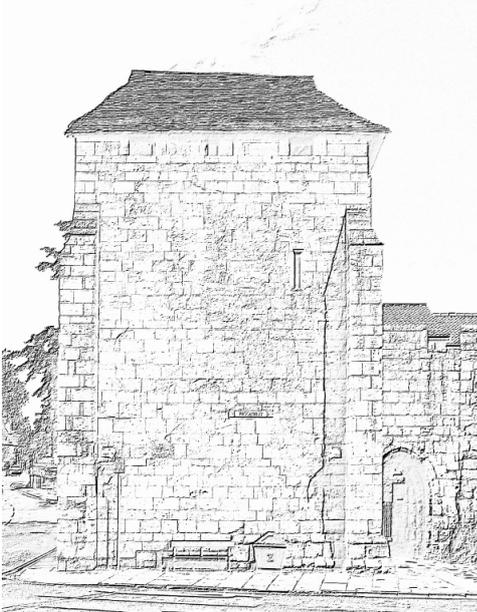
Fishergate postern was only a minor gateway into the city as there was a larger entrance just round the corner at Fishergate Bar. However, in 1489 Fishergate Bar suffered considerable damage in the Yorkshire peasants' revolt against Henry VII. The rebels burned the gates of the bar after murdering the Earl of Northumberland. The murder was at a meeting he had arranged with them to hear their complaints about the King's new taxes. Some say 5,000 peasants went on to attack York's Walls but soon after this the revolt failed. The damaged gateway was bricked up soon after and wasn't re-opened until 1834, to give better access for the cattle market. When Fishergate Bar was bricked up, another gateway was needed fairly urgently. After 1489 it would seem likely that traffic congestion increased, and as the river Foss was silting up, there was the urgent need for a new entry through the walls to be made.



In 1501/2 the Mayor and Corporation of York ordered that a "Substantial Postern Tower" be made, and to be constructed in stone. The stone Fishergate Postern Tower as we see it today, but without the tiled roof, was built between 1504 and 1507. The adjacent earlier postern gate was probably re-built or re-aligned at the time when the stone tower was built.

At the start of the 19th century the Postern Tower clearly had no defensive function and was "now inhabited by a poor Freeman of the City" according to Hargrove {2} (1818). There is a wooden building attached to it in Henry Cave's engraving, printed in 1803, where he also states that "the structure is a beautiful piece of masonry, and is now occupied by a poor family". The purpose of the attached wooden building is unknown. It could not be accessed from within the tower and is outside the city walls.

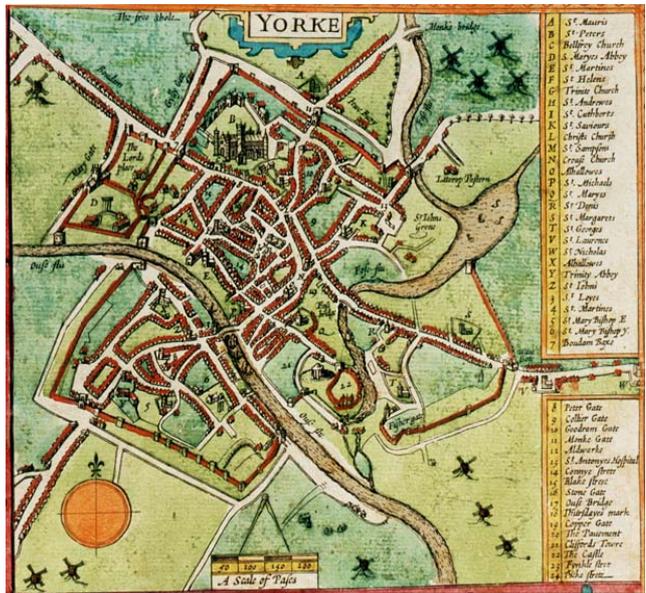
Engraving of 1803



Architecturally, the tower is described as a rectangular tower with a moulded plinth at the base on the east, west and south sides. Rectangular buttresses project at the northwest and southwest angles. The tower now has four floors and a hipped, tiled roof with small gables. The masonry is neatly laid, smooth cut stone. Breaks in the coursing at openings indicate that windows and doorway and other features were not cut on site. The tower is built of magnesium limestone. Some stone could have come from local ruins but new stone would probably have come from a quarry near Tadcaster.

John Speed's map of early 1600s {3} shows a pointed roof in place on the Tower. On the ground floor the fireplace was used when this room was an apartment for a poor 'Freeman' of the city. Rent for the Postern Tower appears to have reflected that the stone tower was rebuilt with better and bigger accommodation as it was increased from 1s 4d per

annum (7p in today's money) when it was Taken Tower in 1503, to 10s 0d (50p in today's money) in 1507 when Christopher Conyers occupied the tower. Conyers was probably a key keeper for the postern. There were three key keepers of the York Posterns, one of which was Fishergate Postern. It is also recorded that in 1449 a woman named Joan was a postern key holder, and she lived in Fishergate Postern Tower.



There appears to be no specific mention of the Postern Tower during the Great Siege of York of 1644, so it presumably was not badly damaged, unlike Walmgate Bar which was pretty much destroyed. Map of York – J Speed 1610

Records of payment to bricklayers for work at the tower in the 1700s may have been connected with the blocking under the windows in the east wall and with two chimney stacks now removed. This also probably related to the blocked fireplace still in situ on the first floor today.



The remains of at least three horses were recovered during an archaeological excavation in 1995. They had been dumped there in the seventeenth century by a local fellmonger - a horse butcher. The tower was used as an artist's studio a few years ago, but with poor access to upper floors and poor light this was only for a short period.

The only entrance to the tower is at ground level in the east wall, which is within the city's defences. The ground floor room has been altered over the years and parts of the stones have been removed. This floor has only one window, a large open fireplace and a narrow spiral staircase winding up to the top floors.

The stairs are very narrow, so please go carefully.

FIRST FLOOR

The first floor is reached part way up the stone spiral staircase. This floor has a blocked fireplace. A recess has been hacked into the east wall on this floor. Holes, seemingly for beams or joists in the east and west walls of the first and second floor cannot represent altered floor levels, since they do not relate to one another. Perhaps they were something to do with a gallery?



This floor has a projecting 'Garderobe' or medieval toilet near the northwest angle, carried on corbels and entered by a short passage. In 1068 William the Conqueror had the river Foss dammed to form moats around the castle. We know that the river Foss just above Castle Mills Dam at that time was wider and came up to the base of the tower. The external base of the postern north wall was lapped by the waters of the Foss and a mediaeval map shows a weir. One wonders how polluted the water became around the tower as the garderobe toilet on the first floor discharged directly into the waters of the River Foss below. If the garderobe

were used today it would discharge directly onto the pavement below!

There is a modern nail in the wall facing the "Garderobe" - perhaps a 21st century joker placing it there to hold the toilet roll! Not a Friend of York Walls we hasten to add. English Heritage does not allow anything to be attached to the walls, not even 'Bluetack'.



Part of the river near Fishergate Postern Tower was known as "Scarlet Pits". It is possible that some action of the water current made a deep hole here. In medieval times there were several orders in the City Books that filth and dung "shall not be thrown" into these pits. Why it was named "Scarlet Pits" is not known. The river was probably the only water supply near to the tower and would be used for bathing, washing clothes and even drinking !



Early in the 18th century, there was only a wooden bridge for foot passengers across the river Foss by St. George's Chapel, near to Fishergate Postern Tower. In 1733 it was decided to make a horse bridge with an arch under it between Castle Mills and Fishergate Postern. When the canal, called the Foss Navigation, was constructed in 1792 the horse bridge was converted into a carriage bridge. This has been widened again since. Davies {4} (1880)

According to William Hargrove {2} (1818) this room had a railed gallery at a higher level at one end, which was used in entertainment. In the Georgian period the first floor along with an upstairs gallery, now probably replaced by the second floor, was a place where dancing and singing provided entertainment. As the rooms are rather small, Hargrove suggests that they were for "Private Assemblies".

SECOND FLOOR

The second floor has windows and a narrow arrow slit looking out towards Fishergate. Perhaps this was a good lookout position in times of old. Today the windows look out towards the Council flats and Walmgate. The arrowed window looks towards Castle Mills Bridge. There is an arched recess in the north wall.

In 1818 a poor Freeman of the city inhabited the tower. William Hargrove {2} in 1818 stated, "The ground floor was a small apartment from which a flight of winding stone steps led to the top. About half way up



these steps is another room, with other conveniences and at one end of it a curious gallery in the form of a music gallery of a modern assembly room; it is railed around and is entered from a door above, from the winding staircase".

The second floor was restored in 1838, and in 1960 an internal staircase at the south end, which had led to a turret on the former flat roof, was removed. According to William Hargrove {2} (1818) the first floor had a railed gallery at a higher level at one end, which was used in entertainment. In the Georgian period the first floor along with an upstairs gallery, now probably replaced by the second floor, was a place where dancing and singing provided entertainment. This second floor is now an "extra floor" inserted at an unknown date, and there are no obvious sign of a music gallery, but this perhaps requires some further investigation!

Hargrove {2} (1818) says, he had an old manuscript presented to his father, that indicates that concerts of music and dancing used formally to be in Fishergate Postern, and there have been music galleries in the upper room. Hargrove also has a footnote on the musical gallery and he quotes a source that came to him via his father from Sir John Ingilby that states "I am told that concerts of music and dancing used formerly to be in Fishergate Postern and there have been music galleries in the upper rooms". He felt that should this information prove correct the musicians and dancers must have been little in number as the rooms are far from spacious.



THIRD / TOP FLOOR



Ascending still higher, we come to the top room. The solid floor has evidently been the original roof of the postern; as it is clearly visible that the present pointed and tiled roof rests on ancient battlements, the embrasures (gaps) between them having been partly walled up with bricks and windows added. Originally, the Postern Tower had a crenellated flat roof, which was open to the elements and drained by two stone spouts placed in the North wall. Speed's map of 1610 {3} shows the tower with a pointed roof. The roof appears in its present form in a 1676 drawing by Place, in which the tower was labelled Edward's Tower, probably

because Edward lived there! The whole top of the tower was covered by a wooden roof and tiles. The windows look out in all directions, towards Castle Mill Bridge, the Council flats and Piccadilly.

In the north wall are traces of the original chimney. It is thought that alterations were made to the windows, and the chimneystack was removed later in the 1700s. One can imagine that the tower windows needed to be small as they were unglazed and drafts would come through at this height. The stair head rises into the roof space and once projected above the parapet. There was a look-out tower in one corner which was about 8 feet higher than the rest of the roof.



The tower was re-roofed in 1818 to form a timber-framed structure of two bays of a hipped tiled roof, the tiles of which were wooden, the roof framing is of common rafters only, without a ridge rib, into which high collars are tenoned and pegged. It is recorded that in the past a dovecote was apparent on this floor.

The walls and the sides of the staircase show numerous masons marks, which indicated which mason had completed the building work. The marks identified the work to the master mason to assess the skill of masons who were new to him. Masons seem to have been paid by the day not by the stone. A mason mark can be identified at the top of the stairs on the door arch.



Fishergate Tower from The Castle – unknown date/origin

Unfortunately modern graffiti carved into the stone (G Hunt 1975 and Keith Martin) can be seen on the far end window upright. This is obviously not allowed. If you want to sponsor a stone in your name please see the website for details.

THE POSTERN GATE

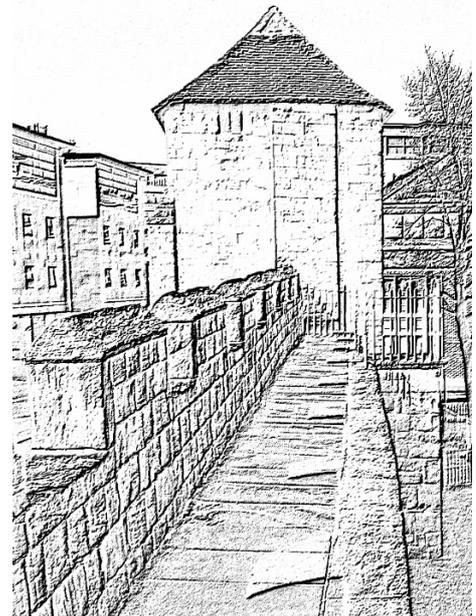


There were seven 'Posterns' or gates for foot traffic into the city; this postern is the only one left standing. There probably was a postern here from medieval times and is it named in the City house books of 1440 as 'POSTERNA JUXTA ECCLESTAM SANCT GEORG II. (Possibly due to its close proximity to St. George's Chapel).

It has been called by its present name since 1548 {5} but in 1642 was also referred to as St. Georges Postern. It has a pointed arch with a portcullis slot of 5 inches - most of the other posterns are thought to have been gateways without a portcullis. Hooks remain for a door that would have opened inward. Cooper {6} (1904) notes that "there would also be a strong oak door, the crooks of which remain". The wall here is 6 feet 2 inches thick and 22 feet high including the parapet, and there must have been some housing for the portcullis mechanism upon it. It is thought the portcullis

must have been about 9 foot high. There is no access to the adjoining tower from the walls above the postern.

The function of the postern would have been to monitor who was coming into the city via this foot entrance. A watchman was employed and would probably have custody of the keys. He would have had to swear on oath that he would examine people entering the city. This was carefully carried out especially when there was a threat of war or plague. The gates were locked daily at 9pm and not re-opened until 4am.



If there were occasions when there was an emergency the keeper would get a bonus payment, as keeper of the keys, for opening up. The watchmen who were employed had to be tall and strong and stop any "unsuitables", beggars, or any person that had been to an area where there had been plague within 20 days. They also had to make sure that women did not enter who were pretending that their husbands were soldiers. No one carrying bundles of clothing or bedding was allowed in.

The last recorded postern watch was in 1803. Fulford Cavalry Barracks was built in 1795, so by 1803 the soldiers at the barracks presumably took over the watch.

Early 20thC postcard (GH Thomas collection)

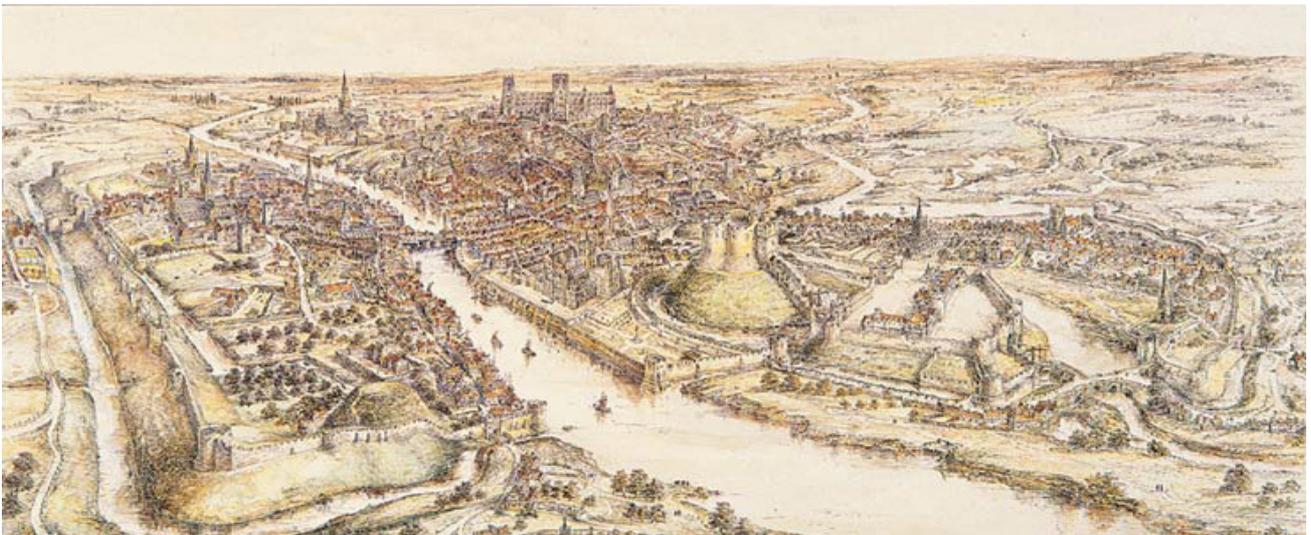
KEEPING GUARD

At times of danger well-armed men guarded the gateways into the city at all hours of the day. The medieval bars and postern gates were closed at night and held by massive bolts, a strong iron chain, strong doors and sometimes a portcullis. The opening and closing of the city gates was superintended by a knight or master porter, with a staff of subordinates, and was performed with considerable ceremony at appointed hours.

There were three kinds of guards or watchmen to keep vigilance. First, the "scout watch" to perambulate (walk) outside the walls, then there was a "stand watch" to act as sentinels at various points upon them, and last but by no means the least, "a search watch" to see that the others did their duty.



If the "search watch" found any of the "stand watch" sleeping three times in one night the unfortunate culprit was handed over the following day to the Lord Deputy. On the next market day he was slung over the city rampart in a basket, some ten or twelve feet above the surface of the water in the moat. There he was left suspended, having been given a loaf of bread, a jar of water and a knife. The bread and water being consumed he must either starve or perish or cut the rope with the knife and plunge himself into the moat. One of the moat-keepers was always in attendance with a boat to "take hymme up when he faleth". The dunking over he was then confined in the Mayors Prison until the next market day, and then publicly banished from the city for one year and a day. Swift {7} (1927)



A panorama of 15th century York drawn by E.Ridsdale Tate in 1915; York Castle is on the right hand side of the river, opposite the abandoned motte of Baile Hill. Castle Mills bridge & the Postern Tower are to the right.

Research by -

Chris Dowell, Friends of York Walls
Gavin Thomas, Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History group
Layout & Photos Alan Fleming, Friends of York Walls.

Sources and References -

Ref: {1} Raine, A. (1955) "Mediaeval York" p19-20. Published by John Murray, London
Ref: {2} Hargrove, W. (1818) "History and Description of the Ancient City of York", Volume II. p23-25. Alexander
Ref: {3} John Speed - Map of Yorke (1611)
Ref: {4} Davies, R. (1880) "Walks Through the City of York (1880)" Published by Kessinger
Ref: {5} "City of York Defences" p 156
Ref: {6} Cooper, T.P. (1904) "York: The story of its walls, bars and castle". Published by Elliot Stock, London.
Ref: {7} Swift, Charles R. (1927) "Everyman's York – A City of Historic Memories". Published by Scott, London